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WORKSHOP EXPLORESUNITY PROGRESS

by Barbara Leix Braver
Editor, Episcopal Times

BOSTON -- "Are we as Churches willing to make the interests of others more important than our own. . . rather than worrying about the power of our individual Churches?"

Henri J. M. Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and theologian, forcefully raised this question at the ecumenical worship service which opened the 18th annual National Workshop on Christian Unity held here May 4-7.

Nouwen, who will shortly leave his faculty position at the Yale Divinity School to work among the poor in Peru, said that the abundant spirit of God can take away the spirit of "narrow-mindedness and clinging" that pervades in this age of scarcity.

The service, held at Trinity Church (Episcopal), marked the opening of the workshop which was attended by more than 450 participants from approximately 25 Christian denominations and also by representatives of the American Jewish Committee.

The National Workshop brings together laity, pastors, ecumenical officers, theologians, and Church leaders to exchange ideas, share resources, and attend seminars of general and specific interest. Meetings of the various denominational groups are also held within the context of the Workshop. The Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Officers held their seventh annual meeting during the Workshop.

The Workshop began in 1963 as a Roman Catholic event, but by 1971 it was completely ecumenical in character.

This 18th annual meeting can be counted a "success" in terms of its own goals -- as articulated by the Rev. James A. Nash, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, who chaired the event and outlined the goals of the planning committee in his opening address.

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One of these goals was "inclusivity." Noticeable progress was made toward that goal with greater numbers of blacks, women, laity and Orthodox participating. "We have no illusions that we have succeeded," Nash said, "but we did try to include those not previously involved. The ecumenical gifts, and tasks, belong to all Christians."

Prayer and worship as a central focus of the Workshop was another goal. As Nash explained, "Our struggle for unity must be expressed in thanksgiving and sharing the Word, not only as a sign of the unity we have, but to nourish the reconciliation we seek." To this end, a worship service and a one-hour Bible study were held each morning.

Community building -- relating across denominational and geographic lines -- was an important aspect of the Workshop. In addition it was to be "an ecumenical experience," breaking across barriers.

Many of those attending praised the workshops for their quality and diverse nature. The denominational representatives met at other times to hear about the results of dialogue and the prospects for "unity," but at the workshops, participants traded practical information and feelings about what it means to be a struggling Christian in the world.

Workshop topics included the following: Islam in the contemporary world; liturgical dance and congregational singing; the current theological perspectives on the Eucharist; the ministry of the laity; "the Coming Great and Holy Synod of Orthodoxy;" a response to the problems of refugees; Episcopal-Roman Catholic marriages; faith, science and the future (the struggle for a just, sustainable and participatory society).

There was a plenary session and a presentation each evening, which were well attended in spite of the full day participants had already put in. The topics were: the Moral Majority and the movement of the religious right, and race and Christian unity.

A presentation was given during the Workshop by the Rev. Gerald Moede, the executive director of the Consultation of Church Union. The body is made up of 10 churches, including the Episcopal Church. Moede said that the Consultation is "committed to a Churchly unity, not a federation, not a council of Churches, but organically one body, as the New Testament has said -- however, with the maintenance of wide diversities in that unity."

The closing address at the National Workshop was given by Dr. Walter G. Muelder, dean emeritus of the Boston University School of Theology. He spoke to the tension between "denominational loyalty and ecumenical commitment," and the need for churches to transform their denominational loyalties into more profound ecumenical commitments.

There are positive functions of religious institutions and the community or koinonia demands institutional form. However, there are negative tendencies which inhibit church institutions from fulfilling their ecumenical destiny. Among those Muelder enumerated were an idolatry of historical structures, fear of change, and efforts to predetermine how the Spirit will speak to future generations.

Muelder concluded by saying that "Churches suffer from failure to take risks in Christian unity. They seem to act as if other forces in the community will be constructively at work on the great issues, thus relieving themselves of the risks they should be taking. But the failure to risk is at bottom a failure of faith in Christ and the Spirit, for all things cohere in the one who is the Lord of the Church and of the world."

One observer, long active in the ecumenical affairs of the Churches, remarked candidly that too many of those who become involved in ecumenical activities do so out of an honest desire faithfully to represent and preserve what is most precious to them in their own tradition. He believes that those who truly seek unity must be wary of that tendency.

The belief was frequently articulated that it is at the level of the local congregation -- and deeper than that at the level of personal relationships -- that unity will really occur, and is already occurring.

The next National Workshop on Christian Unity will be held in Grand Rapids, Mich. in April of 1982.

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PICTURE CAPTION

81147 The National Workshop of Christian Unity brings together ecumenists from all over the United States to share worship and exchange ideas in one of the widest such forums anywhere in the world. Keynote speaker for this year's event -- held in Boston in early May -- was the Rev. Henri Nouwen, theologian, author and spiritual leader. Nouwen, who has announced that he will leave his teaching career at Yale at the end of this term, is shown here autographing one of his many books after taking part in the opening service. (CREDIT: Barbara L. Braver.)

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